BAS 205 Flying Circus Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Sunday, April 27, 1919, was the day the Flying Circus came to Butte. Thirty-five thousand people, reportedly the largest crowd in the history of Butte, turned out to see battle-scarred American and French airplanes, veteran aviators, and captured German Fokkers perform an aerial display.

The purpose was to generate enthusiasm for and purchases of Victory or Liberty Bonds, intended to raise funds to pay the debts incurred during the allied victory in World War I. They paid 4.75% interest and nearly $5 billion in gold notes were issued. Butte had a quota, a goal, of $3 million in bonds purchased over the three days of the campaign. In earlier bond campaigns, Silver Bow County had purchased more than $22 million for quotas totaling less than $11 million, so the successful sale was pretty much a foregone conclusion.

The Anaconda Copper Mining Company band played to accompany the aerial acrobatics of three British and 25 American air aces. They performed loop-the-loops, nose dives, tail spins, mock dog fights, and Immelmann maneuvers, the German tactic of a half-turn and roll to position an aircraft for a second attack after the first. They also bombarded the audience with thousands of flyers promoting the Victory Bonds, and 62 certificates good for a captured German helmet – but you had to buy a bond to get the souvenir.

Lt. Leland Miller flew his biplane over Butte, as he did all cities on the tour, and snapped the first aerial photo of the town, a shot extending from Crystal Street in the west to Main, and from the Original Mine south to Galena.

The show was held at Marr Field, at the terminus of the Englewood Trolley Line near Lake Avoca and the Butte Country Club. Captain W.J. Hoover, in charge of the performance, pronounced the field the best of the 15 at which the Flying Circus had appeared, better than Seattle, Spokane, or Helena.

In 1919, there were few airfields of note anywhere in the United States, and Butte didn’t have scheduled air transport until 1927 when Butte National Airport (now Bert Mooney) was constructed. Even so, within a year of the Flying Circus performance, airplane rides and flying instruction were offered out of Marr Field and the first delivery of a newspaper by air in the Northwest took place when the Anaconda Standard was flown from Anaconda to Butte’s Marr Field and on to Deer Lodge in January, 1920. The air delivery to Deer Lodge took 29 minutes, twice as fast as the fastest train, and although pilot L.G. Rees had “never seen Deer Lodge,” and didn’t know where he’d land, the flight was a success. The 15-minute Anaconda to Butte run, at 3:30 a.m., was the first night landing in Butte, with special lights installed at Marr Field for it.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.